

A vote for ambulance fees is a vote for the poor

By Duchy Trachtenberg

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When I read the Oct. 6 Metro article “Leggett proposes cuts in public safety services,” I was reminded again of how a vocal minority can use fear and misinformation to wage a political battle and win.

In this case, the volunteer firefighters in Montgomery County have used such tactics — an Oct. 7 letter to The Post stated bluntly that the fees “could risk lives” — to advance a multiyear campaign against a proposed ambulance fee reimbursement because it will, as the story put it, “dampen their own fundraising efforts.”

Good public policy is a product of thoughtful and reasoned judgment. During our budget deliberations last year, I decided to reverse my position and support the ambulance fee reimbursement for two reasons. First, the legislation proposed by the County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) concisely outlined a fair waiver process for those who are uninsured and indigent. Because of that, the reimbursement fee is nothing more than the collection of insurance dollars for services rendered.

But most important, I understood then, and I still do, that this reimbursement money is required to cover the growing costs of essential county services, including those related to public safety and social services. I understood that the only way to ensure our continued support for the mentally ill, at-risk youths, the homeless and the many nonprofit groups we depend on every day was to boldly say “yes” to this fee, despite my earlier misgivings. I understood that the needs of thousands of residents outweighed the small risk that someone may not call for emergency assistance because they misunderstood the fee policy. And remember: There is no convincing evidence that there has been any significant decline in requests for emergency services in neighboring jurisdictions where such fees policy are in place.

My position on this issue, and others related to spending, no doubt contributed to my defeat in the Democratic primary last month. That doesn’t mean I was wrong. The Montgomery County government will continue to face fiscal challenges and growing social needs over the next decade.

It’s time to close the curtains on the adolescent, testosterone-driven theatrics of the past four years of county politics. We need to face up to the financial difficulties we are in and put the people of Montgomery County first — especially those who have little voice in this political fight and will undoubtedly shoulder the burden of service elimination and program cuts.